

DOG-HEAD

by

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A collection of original poetry

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## ON OVERSHARING WITH A PASSENGER WHO STARES INTO SPACE

You and I are sounds, aren't we?  
A couple of echoes inside a tin can?  
Enough of that. Look. Speed smears the world  
across our windows: a buck leaping  
behind a smokestack; a rusted Buick at a factory  
wrapped in, yes, brimstone ivy;  
a switch outpost's roof charred to its rafters.  
Earlier on the platform, were you crying?  
Your glasses blackened in sunlight,  
and you made no sound. You sit now  
reading a magazine about green spaces,  
and I shouldn't say how, in pictures,  
the human body stripped to its circulatory system,  
resembles a tree with a wasp's nest at its center,  
left and wet. How about this weather?  
The local sports team that never wins?  
Maybe I'll tell you how in love I am  
with the way tunnels darken windows into mirrors,  
or how my childhood tormenter lived  
in a red-bricked bungalow like any in the row  
we trundled past. Her favorite joke began,  
*what does the plank say to the face.*  
What was your childhoods' eye color?  
Can I tell you where my mind goes  
when I read the break-in-case-of labels on glass  
or see box-springs, stained and briar-snagged,  
on an embankment? It's raining now.  
Fellow sound, tell me something.  
How often do you feel like a missile convoy  
plowing through the guardrail of a truss bridge  
or skidding down Main Street in a mountain town?

Look at us now. Or look out the window.  
In this rain, the city dims like my touch-screen.  
I'll sweep my finger across it so you can see.

## DOG-HEAD

Our mascot was the bulldog. Bulldogs chased me across playgrounds until I dreamed them. In class, I finished mazes with a green crayon. Hedges grew skyward from pages, and I ran. My dad once called this kind of thing my day-head. When my day-head happened, they called him at his office. I learned the name *Daedalus* from an article I read for science class. It meant a plane with leg-powered wings—carbon tubing, plastic skin. A man with a long name flew a longer way across the sea from Crete. At recess, I reread the same book of illustrated myths and cryptids. I dreamed of bulldogs with bull's heads. My day-head was a zoo where gods slept. *Daedalus* sounded like *dad*, so I loved him. Class was an enclosure made of cinderblock and twelve weeks without winter. Behind the glass, my day-head paced. Daedalus was a zookeeper. I dreamed of a god with a bull's body and a hood sewn from my face. The article said I weighed the same as the *Daedalus*. I traced flight plans and crash sites on my desk. My teacher asked us to draw self-portraits. The trees were hydras. On the paper, I drew an outline of my face. I cut my eyes out with scissors. They called me to the office, and Daedalus was waiting. I found a bulldog in a magazine and drew a maze inside each iris. We played tug-of-war in gym. My day-head was a knotted rope dangling from steel rafters. I pushed my thumb into the sun. I fell once. I cut the bulldog from the page, then ripped his head in two. I glued one half over the left side of my face. I left the right side blank. The article said the *Daedalus* crashed twenty-one feet from the black sand of a beach on Santorini. My day-head was a Kevlar fuselage belly-down in the sea. They called home. I ran home. I dreamed of a man with a bulldog's head on the wrong end of a rope. On the right side of my face, I drew a sunny day. I signed my name.



## SYNESTHETIC ALBUM

### 1. *Living Room*

Our caretaker splays supine in her green suede recliner,  
hands folded in her lap.

Her mother tongue is palm.

Her mouth is closed.

We pretend to sleep soundly  
until we do.

When she whispers in my ear,  
it sounds like a brick sounds  
tossed into a pile of bricks.

A hammer's song along a wall.

She stays quiet  
as long as we do.

### 2. *Playroom*

I build sentences out of what spills from plastic bins.

What I mean to say is *field*—  
the green soldiers shouldering bent rifles  
as they behead a barbie. Or *please*—  
a mammoth's trunk clamped in a saber-tooth's jaws.

Shame, today, is a game of Sorry!  
Sometimes I'm angry,  
but need a ouija planchette to say it.

I scour the cardboard void

for enough letters to build a voice. I unfold  
a Monopoly board and line each avenue with houses.

I lower my face to the blue strip of ocean  
along Boardwalk, and blow.

Now I'm a hurricane.

### 3. *Blanket*

Our caretaker was a monster.

I'm awake.

### 4. *Shelf and Counter*

My words taste funny.

Sometimes she whispers the flavors into what I say.

I rip pages into strips  
and slip them in my mouth.

I spit out lima beans.

She reminds me that books aren't ice cream sandwiches.

I say, *I don't know*,  
and it feels like soggy Cheerios.

Her words taste like the tip of a battery.

To this day, I can't explain why I taste

red Kool-Aid whenever someone tells me

*prove it.*

5. *Wall*

Time is not the tick of hands

that touch once an hour.

It's a cube of chicken

cooling on a blue plastic plate,

a tube of peppermint toothpaste.

Flowers I peel from the wall

taste like time-out, but not time.

That's a slice of strawberry

pressed onto my outstretched tongue.

6. *Hallway*

I wake in my ear but know better than to wander there.

There's a bedroom filled with broom handles,

a locked closet, and the hum

of a laundry machine. I'm four. Floorboards creak.

My shivers are tattletales.

I'm a prodigy.

My field of expertise is silence on a stair.

7. *Basement*

My heroes live on my clothes.

On the green carpet, they crumple.

She's hidden the crayons

because I keep drawing cities  
on her walls. She's sick of scrubbing  
the shadows of winged animals  
each searchlight casts into the sky.

8. *Corner*

Sometimes I forget that skin's a privilege,  
not a right. In this picture: a door,  
yellow gloves, a bucket and sponge.  
In another: a horizon  
of red shorts, my pale thighs.  
The curled tip of her thumb is the city I live in.  
I'm not its hero.  
I'm another boy made of my skin.

9. *Garden*

She whispers cracks into the window.  
The more the pale band on her finger fills with sun  
the more glass needs fixing.  
Our cheeks are windows  
she sometimes has to open for us.  
The carpet's covered in backyard.  
I won't bring the outside in again.

## HOW DO YOU FEEL

Lithium-lipped, thank you  
very much, still trunk-tongued  
enough to mistake my words  
for the stems of lilies  
I'll slip from my teeth  
to sleep's during another  
of our listless, cotton-mouthed tangos,  
or as if I'm some prodigy of how  
steel-meshed windows multiply  
the fields of the world  
they divide me from as I stumble,  
needle-thighed, around a room  
whose orange lights look like a fire  
too ice-snuffed to remake me  
in any image let alone its own,  
because soon I will become a tick  
burrowing into the hand  
of a clock locked behind iron  
grating, still awaiting a phone call  
from someone whose name  
could as easily be Lucy  
as Lucidity after a night, two nights  
ago, we rode roller coasters  
until the Midway blurred  
into amber and lifted hands  
and, within switchbacks,  
we kissed until we didn't—  
all this a few hours before  
I'd try along the shore, ten steps  
from Lot C, to prove Lake Erie  
and my lungs were the same—

and now, as I already said, I am  
thumb-eyed and pharmaceutically-  
induced enough to feel the feeling  
in my limbs flee, to need  
the next stranger who asks me this  
to know exactly what I mean  
when I use words like *gauze-*  
*thoughted* to answer, and so,  
because right now I'd believe,  
depending on halogens' flickers,  
it's just one shade of truth  
past or shy of hyperbole to look  
into a mirror and say lightning fits  
inside an iris, I'll answer  
by asking: am I, in fact,  
a shadow, and if so, please  
be one with or scatter from me.

## DAEDALUS BUILDS A TREEHOUSE

Before my son turns six I carve his name  
these places: oaken rung of rope ladder,  
the plywood plank he paints. His fingers seek  
some twigs to whittle, kindling for flames

he'll touch before he'll make. The wind adjusts.  
*Nothing falls* is all I say as he drops  
his hammer in the grass beside his shoes.  
He won't remain marooned in canopy—

before the pills that douse what he can't name,  
before the feather in his hand means blade,  
I watch him use his tongue to dab the sap  
from each finger, then string for him a bow

of birch. He charks his palms with wings of moths  
he's touched. I'm softer on him than their dust.

## SONG WITH PHARMACEUTICAL WARNING

Most days begin the same. Orange clouds turn cotton  
in sunlight. And you—dressed in them, face pressed  
to lawn—say all you hear each night is grass.  
The blades taste like asphalt. You wake in broken glass.

In sunlight—what you'd dressed in pressed to your face—  
you see the bungalow where relapse lives and know the quickest way.  
You wake in broken glass—the taste of blades and asphalt  
on your tongue—with knowledge of how to rewrite time and space.

You see the bungalow where relapse lives and know the quickest way  
is through the canyon you land in once your doctors say the word  
*manic*. You rewrite space and time with your tongue  
and leave through the window. The sky turns gauze, sun a russet stain.

Once, a doctor you'd just met said *canyon*. You said *god-bath*.  
And that's why you need tablets to get back. The day  
you leave through the window, the sun's a russet stain on a sky of gauze.  
That night, you pull over on a highway to take a nap in sumac.

And that's why you take tablets to get back. The day you wake,  
you're in the furnace room of the school you'll quit—a year older  
and wanting only to sleep among some sumac, or in a highway.  
You wake again. A canyon, surgical white. You drink charcoal

and say how a year ago you lay in the furnace room of a school you quit.  
Days mostly begin the same: orange clouds turn cotton.  
You wake again in a surgically white canyon, drink charcoal  
and talk about lawns. How all you hear each night is grass.



## THIS CITY HANDS ME MYTHS; I HAND THEM BACK

Today happened. On accident and underground.  
I spent it missing trains, mistaking brass tiles in a barrel-

vaulted concourse for sound, and sound for solace. I kissed  
a wall made of whispers, and decided to once again

listen to what it told me. To leave with or be left  
by the first stranger to mistake me for a pillar.

Another train, another tunnel turned gospel by headlight.  
According to different shades of sharpie,

I'm a dirty hippie, and any trash bag swept from a storm grate  
can apotheosize above skyscrapers. I swear, if I see

another thing shipped to the sky. I swear, if the sky.  
Yesterday, a man wearing a sign said, not long.

He showed me how to make this city a garden  
from any angle by facing trees in the park

and fencing my field of vision with my hands.  
Tomorrow, I'll walk to where I laid beside a woman

I'd never see again outside of sleep, to where  
every word we never spoke was either a city I hoped

we'd live in, or a cinder dusting an ashtray  
whose smoke I woke to. Someday I'll stop measuring

my distance from certain memories in fire escapes.  
I'll stop mistaking a cloud for a child's face

behind rooftop playgrounds' chain-link. I'll walk  
to the edge of the garden overgrowing an elevated railway

and throw down the only holy word I know.  
I'll see if it becomes a dove before it hits the pavement.

## SONG OF THE HOME DEPOT ASCETIC

I tried to DIY my own transcendence  
with lumber from those aisles that smell like sap.  
I loaded carts with tools to mend my fence  
and bent each nail to build this devil-trap.  
The second time I tried, I made such holes  
in sheetrock walls and tiles of grecian marble,  
I saw—no, swam—beyond to astral shoals  
and with my hammer made the cosmos warble.  
Yes, all was mine, and I was all's, and this  
did not an out-of-body body make.  
My recessed lights flick on and burn like bliss.  
The sticks and leaves and snakes slip past my rake.  
Am I, I ask, the desert, sky, or liar—  
Am I the bodhi tree that caught on fire?

## HOUSESITTING WITHOUT A PRESCRIPTION

The floor is baseboards  
and rusty nails  
and my table.

Dinner is cold cuts  
on wheat, pinch  
of sawdust,  
and my directions  
are to empty  
each room  
into trash bags.  
If intruders,  
I make the foyer,  
from doorjamb  
to staircase, a gallery  
of what our glass  
looks like smashed.

Tonight, I trust only  
what might slit  
the length of a snake  
without thinking:  
a rake's teeth  
upturned in the lawn,  
kitchen knives  
twined to curtain rods.  
My mother's away.  
I must remember  
she's not a vase.  
Nor is my brother  
a bedroom paneled with mirrors.  
Nor am I, while I am  
here, this hammer.

## DOG HEAD

Her hundred-sixty-plus-pound bullmastiff  
with his drool and bone-snap jowls—his twitch-  
and-yowl when, mid-dream, his nostrils caught my scent  
or if my trembling issued ripples of body heat  
through the rooms in which he slept—yes, him  
and all this could've made an excellent metaphor  
for memory, if not for how arrhythmically  
he remembered me. He was Sisyphean like that.  
One hour I'd be petting him. In ten minutes  
he'd forget, and the bark could scare buckshot  
out of a shotgun, a burglar from his flesh.  
Back then, I slept more than eighteen hours a day.  
What I recall made about as much sense living through  
as it will here: sex that may or may not  
have turned my blood lucid. Pharmaceutically-  
induced everything. Food, I think. And a deltoid tattoo  
in ash-and-burn-colored ink—the artist's take  
on how I imagined the animated head  
of Dante's She-Wolf. Above it, a cloud-eyed lover  
in the sky whose gaze I hoped would wake me.  
Once, at 3:00 a.m., I stepped out of her bed  
and onto the bullmastiff's globe-sized head.  
I spent a second at eye-level with the pipework above  
her dropped tile ceiling. I feel like love, since then,  
happened on the balls of my feet, or in sleep.  
Doors creaked. Each floorboard was a piano key.

## LANDSCAPE WITH GOD ENVY

It's night—the kind a word  
like *night* is made for.  
Trees that might be trees.  
Crows that might be leaves.  
The cawing of the fall.  
That word, any really, feels  
like another dried parody  
of a lawn beneath my feet.  
Darkness sags into its wind-  
swept piles of twigs  
and meanings. It lived here  
before me which, I guess,  
makes all this a kind of colony  
wherein my will is king, the light  
a refugee. I said *happy*, once,  
and knew I was. *Good*, I said,  
and had to smile a hundred times  
before a mirror until either  
the mirror or I believed it.  
Only, the mirror was a ravine.  
From the bridge, I leave  
a thumbnail-sized hole in the sky  
and a globe-shaped glob of spit  
in a ditch. I'm imagining  
errant animal secretions  
swelling into creaks and trillium-  
lined banks. And now I'm done  
running errands for creation.  
I fit pistils and stamens in my ears,  
and they bloom into Thanks-  
giving. Please let me walk  
to the train station, so I can pace  
this era-less splash of light  
across the platform in peace.  
I want to smell footprints  
on the air, then ride. The tunnel's  
where I rearrange the scene.

## AMBIEN JOURNAL

Before sleep, I see anvils tied to my eyelashes. Now, a maplewood floor  
or granite countertop. Now, splayed with hardware store paint swatches of colors  
named from the remains of an ascetic's language: Sea Foam Immolation,  
Flames of Wild Sage. My walls, once Absolute Tombstone, I don't recall

\*

repainting. I remember midnight, its digits written in blue LED below the cloud-  
splotted steel frame of a microwave. I remember wearing flip-flops and comprehending  
snowdrifts. Do you have to lose your mind to get an invitation to it?

A mailbox asked me this. I remember my mind. Like a birthday card I received

\*

for a year I won't complete. Or like the party: balloon bouquets slipping and popping  
along vaulted rafters. A string drifted to my fingertips, and I syphoned another voice  
from blue latex lips. Like any place sickness lives, a madman's brain  
has at least one sanctuary. A bathroom told me this. The moon grubbed against

\*

the skylight, and I said thanks, but I can find a medicine cabinet in the dark.  
My breath spoke with such a slight accent. It told me I was nothing but a fireplace.  
I woke with half my face masked by ash. Now, this flame  
snaking to wax as forests rain from anvil clouds. Now, a door closed

\*

while I unhinge. Face in the mirror, be mirror. Mirror, window. Window, ripple me  
into milk thistle. Wake what's flesh about me and make it meadow, as sleep intended.  
I ignore the labels again and fumble at the ignition. Right before my last sleep-  
at-the-wheel crash, I imagined my breath as a field of alveoli. Then as hubcaps and after-

\*

math. As the accordion of my chassis and a semi's grill faintly dented  
with the suggestion of my fenders. I drive an eighteen wheeler and still I couldn't  
wreck you. My afterlife told me this. Silence, not light, followed the flares.  
I woke in a strange city and stayed awake. The third night, my best definition of night:

\*

skyline. Spire-farm. Halogen vines. Angel wing schematic. Sunrise:  
Scythe. God-combine on fire. Star-thresher. Taxicab. I: breath-silo. Flesh-tenement.  
Eviction from my eyes. Long after your sense-engine breaks,  
I'm going to be your driver. Something claiming to be me said this.

## HYPNOTIC SONG

You need only hands and knees. Chisels hide  
in bedding planes whose wetness tells you *here*,

*once, the lunar well.* Make yourself the width  
of air between your lips. Grottoes open

into bone orchards, splintered tusk—ochre-  
stained and charcoal-smudged archives of ether-

real decrees. God's stenographers: stones.  
Through prior eyes, you saw the groundwater's

trickle in the dark, followed flowstone past  
where hollowness turned onyx. On its walls,

you smeared visions in charred vines and calcite.  
The floors are rippling. The ceiling is wings.

A drip's echo tells all that needs seeing:  
light becomes a cure, or it requires one.



2.

## MANIC AUBADE

Yes—cradle, then rain,  
sun, sand-box and rusted chain-  
link, baseball in the diamond  
by the playground, first base,  
first kiss, home plate, then heart-  
break, first house, black granite  
countertops, lilac centerpieces  
at tables, lit candles, red petals,  
new cradles, someday  
a bunch of graves—all that.  
Now ask me about lightning.  
Last night, I asked a storm.  
It lent its current to each synapse  
and I stepped into a skyline  
in which I was these and in this  
sequence: some patron saint of cracks,  
the paper sack through which  
I spilled, a glowing smoke-  
stack and the hill I watched from,  
a man yanked toward daybreak  
by the veins. Some mornings,  
I mistake my scabs for petals  
and smell them. When I drive,  
I pull over to stay awake. I pick  
through gravel beneath over-  
passes for enough shards to answer  
the next riddle. I know, I think,  
my windows were once sand.

## DOG-HEAD

We want to see. Not god, but dog. Crucified, too, we heard. Beneath the asylum, tunnels. In one of them, a cistern. In that, a mound of concrete sledgehammered and pickaxed to dirt. We heard, but didn't see. On the mound, a plywood cross—each plank three feet. We heard, but didn't see. A smooth-shank roofing nail through each paw. On the hill in a tunnel, the fur stained the darkness golden. Long since retrieved, the Dollar-Store tiara—silver glitter still behind the ears. Jowls, lips, and teeth streaked with red lipstick. We want to see. Not seeing hell is a kind of hell. We heard the motes of dust settled where the tongue lulled.

\*

Psychiatric ruin. Pharmaceutical zoo. *Haven* a shard of its name once. We bring enough E to make it heaven. The plywood shutters were pried open prior to us. We are still trespassing. We are still breaking. We wedge ourselves through the window and step into the intake room. A drip's echo lends the dark its dimensions. The flashlights lend us our memories of them: counter, wall-mounted chairs, water fountain fixture, no fountain. Files scattered into a new floor. An account of something unseen that died nearby told by the buzzing of flies. Some water. A flood. An alibi.

\*

There is a kid our age in our subdivision. There are many. But this one claims prophecy. We're convinced he canvases the cul-de-sacs for animals. Pets. Strays. Sacrifices. We consider that we, too, could be animals. Of course, of the nicest order. Animals, nice or not, can be made of anything. We believe there must be an unseen cult of culverts and boyhood stalking these lawns. We fear what snatches our more-legged from our porches and backyards and ghosts them in the hedges. We're convinced, though, whoever he is, he is the Dog-Head.

\*

What we bring to heaven: flashlights. Batteries. An aluminum baseball bat. At least one crowbar. Clothes the color of crows. The need to wait until nightfall. A duffel bag filled with spray paint canisters. Bottle rockets. A half-polished bottle of Jack. My *Manrikikusari*, which we can't pronounce, so it becomes *chain*, which we can. A length we still can't wield without bruises.

\*

Because god is a crime committed by everybody. Because our community was almost crimeless. Because of this, we'd drape sidewalks in police tape. Because of the garter snake outlined in pink chalk. Because a lawnmower blade can fork the most serpentine body. Because it can bifurcate a wilder tongue. Because we uncoiled green garden hoses to reclaim eden from our lawns. Because, instead, we made them mud. Because we are of mud. Because, as boys, we cooled our bodies in mud. Because we wear what we come from.

\*

Chain the color of dusk's cloud cover. Braided steel. As many inches long as years the god we stopped praying to wore flesh. But the flesh talks back to us. We train for a heaven we can break into. We whip couch cushions and our backs, dig out stacks of plates our parents would never unbox and return them shattered to storage bins. And the flesh talks back to us. We practice how we'd thrash apologies out of darkness if it confronted us. The flesh talks back, and we numb its tongue with crushed ice we shove into ziplock bags.

\*

In grade school, Dog-Head scours the playground for loose change. Just watch him. To find a lost coin, know how loss happens. Watch. It's in the pockets. During a pick-up game. Wait for them to drop light onto the pavement. Dog-Head knows where everything falls. He paws the wood chips under swing sets, monkey bars, and the platforms of jungle gyms. To find what's lost, become it. See where light falls, and onto it, fall like it.

\*

Polaroids: a boiler room. The red yawn of furnaces. Hell's machinery, heat's and full of coughs. The instruments of deification stashed behind a panel of pressure gauges. A shoebox full of nails. Hammer. Ropes. A table displaying an alchemy of knots. The small murders living under a storm grate. The black we wore to blend in with the backs of our eyelids.

\*

Basketball. Jump-rope. Two-hand touch. Tag. Four-square. In childhood's mansion, there are many windows to break. Fall through. We kick soccer balls against the wall-length pane of the cafeteria window. Their ricochets miss Dog-Head, mostly. Mostly on purpose. Girls wince whenever he roots around the poles of the swing-set. They launch into the air mid-arc to get away from him. I was supposed to invite Dog-Head to something once.

\*

Below the wreckage of wellness are three square miles of concrete corridors. Spray-painted smiley faces mark each quarter mile. Adolescence is a bottle-rocket assembled in an unlit tunnel. There are no grates to launch through, so we launch into the wires snaking the length of the ceiling. Delinquency is a gospel told in black-light, in glyphs. A map of wagging neon tongues tagged on cinderblock. Never be teenaged underground.

\*

I once find Dog-Head where the field slopes to a basin in which storms pool. Rather, I find him becoming a storm. I reach to wipe the snot from his nose. He slaps my hand. I punch his stomach. He spits coins into the grass. He wears black sweatpants. No pockets. So he makes the space under his tongue his bank. I could tell. I never tell. How he holds our coins in his mouth for hours without swallowing.

\*

More polaroids: Grace. Her breasts. Her braces. The soft abrasions her cherry lipgloss covers as her lips emboss my face. Her face. Hers against mine. Her church. Dog-Head placing a penny in the collection plate. Grape juice and the aftertaste of Christliness. The sweetness of consensual cannibalism. The blood's tang of sharp iron and failed helixes. A flake of body on each tongue. The collective crunch of a congregation biting.

\*

Not because making something god can be as easy as seeing a nail put through it. Not because there is a kid who renounced his treehouse to take up carpentry. Not because of what became of the planks. Not because he was left to sit in the bramble thicket of his childhood playing house with his psychopathy. Not because of the piles of crab apples and maple leaves. Not because of the nails we found there. Not because the hammer is unseen.

## HELL PLACARD

*"I should have my hell for anger, my hell for/pride,—and the hell for laziness; a symphony of hells."*

—Arthur Rimbaud

[For My Inability to Love Mine Enemy]

Psalm, too, for you. Thorn-throated eulogies.  
Podium-clutching, and such. I'll send heart-  
felt letters to the loved ones you, too, must have.  
And by *felt*, I mean that cheap material  
children scissor into trees and stars for scenes  
of the Nativity. By *heart*, I mean  
cardiac tissue, animosity's  
cardstock. My vengeance is so biblical,  
I, too, mistake it for love as it breaks  
through darkened clouds that forget how to rain.  
No need for oars. No sleep beside the waves  
or in reeds gathered from scream-rippled shores.  
A bipedal and hole-handed lamb I will  
never be. Still, I'll evict you from your grave.

## NO-FACE

*Sawed-off*, J said by the make-table  
when I told him what I saw inside the 7-11  
where I sometimes bought hot dogs  
at 1:00 a.m. *At least that's what the cops said.*  
He told me about how during one dinner rush  
he saw No-Face in the walk-in eating pepperonis  
from the cardboard box. I wanted to know  
how he chewed without an upper jaw.  
I was finishing massage school then,  
learning muscles between shifts. J asked me  
to name what should've been there—  
masseter, the top half of orbicularis oris.  
And I rattled off the bones beneath—  
vomer, shards of zygomatic arch—also gone.  
J thumbed dough to the edge of the pan  
and, beginning with the nose, made a smile  
out of meat. I delivered that day  
to an apartment off Carpenter Road  
where No-Face asked with a hand-written sign  
for change: *My face. Marrow cancer.*  
*Today's my birthday.* Other restaurants  
on our avenue also cooked up and dished out  
No-Face apocrypha to-order: a suicide  
aborted half too late, or a crack rock  
snorted into his sinus burning until he turned  
his cheeks into a canyon. We heard  
a woman beat him to a curb with the purse  
he tried snatch. I wanted to help him once.  
After work, I idled to a red light  
where he stood in the sumac alongside  
an off-ramp, same sign. I cracked my window.  
I thought I was staring the abyss in the eyes—  
all that was really left were the eyes,  
a hole gurgling and purple. I couldn't find  
a dollar, and I forgot I had a question.

## SYNESTHETIC PRIMER

A.

Always. I learn my tongue this way. The way a word like *always* tastes like *PB & J*. The way D makes it for us at her nursery, the way we ask for it. Wonder Bread, Jiffy, grape jelly. The way everything's better with a cut in it. Crossways. Always.

B.

Before, as in, another kind of now. Before, a spoonful of peanut butter spread with a knife. Now, grilled swiss on wheat. D peels a banana and holds the tip between her thumb and a blade. Before we eat we must be clean.

C.

*Clean* means D lets us keep our clothes on. Clean means we don't have to stand against the wall. Clean is how we are before D or her daughters open the pantry. It tastes like candy: chocolate, caramel, toffee, cotton. Not rock. That's what we find in the backyard, where cleanness's mean twin lives. Twin sounds like Twix, so sisterhood must be delicious. Unless your name is clean. Then your sister tastes like the bottom of a rock.

D.

D is a woman who's not named dad or mom or me. Her name doesn't taste like things I eat at home. D tastes like floor. A kitchen's linoleum. A carpeted basement. When I'm really hungry, my native language: game pieces. I wear a thimble on the tip of my tongue, line my teeth with fleets of battleships. I almost choked on a queen once.

E.

Every day. D sprays each Lego at least three times with bleach. Plastic people and trees no longer snap to the baseplate, which is no longer green. Sometimes I watch the dyes running down their sides as they dry. Every day tastes like a rainbow licked white.

F.

Free is a word that tastes like gum. It's fruity, but I can't yet blow it into a bubble.



G.

Gift. For D's birthday. Not just a crayon, but a Great Red. To make one, pull the reds from every box and peel off their labels. Twist a rubber band around them and set them on the windowsill by your mother's plants. The sun will do the rest.

H.

Heroes live on shirts. Or in them. My shirt is in the wash. Superman wears a blue shirt beneath his white one. I'm not a hero because the shirt beneath my shirt is skin. I'm wearing my skin shirt because I am not a hero and was warned about the backyard. Mud is not Metropolis. I won't try to save the earthworms from rain again.

I.

I get to chose sometimes where I'm in timeout: the chair in the corner or the corner of my eye.

J.

Joke, as in, brick. D's daughter, K, twirling in the garden. The joke in her hand. Joke, as in, *it was just a*. A broken ice machine in a kitchen with no ziplock bags. A sip of coke from the can K presses to my eye. *You can have the rest*, she says, *but no one can know*.

K.

K takes us onto the deck and lines us up against the vinyl siding. She says, *present*, and we lift our hands: boxes wrapped in ribbon, my Great Red in perforated computer paper. M, her sister, peels the foil off a tin someone's mother left, and hands each hand a cookie. She scrapes the frosting from mine and breaks it in half. My Great Red now lives somewhere in the garden.

L.

*Love*, as in *love taps*. As in, only when I'm bad. And only ever over the shirt or pants. As in, D loves me, and my mom and dad begin to ask.

M.

M means business. I don't know what this means, but when she and K pull me into their room and tell me to eat what they make me find in my nose, I listen. The last time she said it, I needed stitches.

N.

No. The only word I know that tastes like paper, tofu, and the armrest of a microfiber sofa.

O.

Once, I left the door open, and the dust got out. It isn't house-trained, the dust. D never takes it on walks. She keeps it crated most days, or on a chain beneath the maple. We played fetch once, and it bit me. Since then, we haven't talked.

P.

(Never in your pants.) *Proof* tastes too much like fruit punch. At home one afternoon, I begin with apples. I tie twine around screws, push them through the skin, and string Braeburns and Granny Smiths, one by one, from the garage door's track. I glove my hands in plastic wrap. Soon, the cantaloupes. My dad has to call someone about the ants.

Q.

Queens K and M draw their sovereignty from a deck of cards. K is clubs. M is diamonds. The rest of us are jokers again. We cut hats and masks out of multi-colored construction paper. We set the stage. Our queens tie red yarn around our wrists and ankles.

R.

Reasons dried out on a vine. Reasons smushed into a box. Reason Bran, milk-logged, in a ceramic bowl. I want a book about reasons, chocolate-covered, by the handful.

S.

Silence, skin, and whatever's hiding in it. Before and after there was speech or a reason for it, there were peaches floating in a tin.

T.

Tongue, you spend most days on cleanup duty or on thin ice. You sleep in the attic. You're a Disney princess befriended by mice.

U.

Upstairs or under, if there are ghosts in D's house during nap time, they don't wake her either. Wherever they are, they fake-sleep beside us.

V.

Void: a conversation with the host of a midday game show through a vent.

W.

Wand from a TV antenna. Boomerang from the handle of a beach pail.

X.

XOXO as the signature on the Polaroid labeled, *Our Hero*, in magic marker. D crouches next to me. I don't remember what she says, except that it tastes like frozen waffles and syrup right after drinking a carton of milk.

Y.

*Yours truly*, is how my grandmother suggests I end my letter to D after she moved.

Z.

Zucchini will either stop happening in my head, or it will rot. That's how I did.

## DEMOLITION SONG

Too often sledgehammers are the answer—  
rotting crossbeam, plank, or stud, this ribcage,  
these boarded storefronts. Avenues all sound  
like rooftop cisterns, their absent water.

Lord, I'm too often dawn's color of rain  
left too long on the frames of pickup trucks  
whose wheels are cinderblocks. Answer my bones  
just as you would my driveway, with bindweed.

By brake light, I break glass on the wrong side  
of your sound walls. I read the pyro's creed  
from a matchbook, and make my church once more  
my gas can. I'll ask again—how many

streetlights has my faith avenged? Flicker once,  
if you can't hear me. Flick off if you can.

EZE, FRANCE

Stone store-fronts, awnings,  
dappling of red moss. Vine

as grout for fissure. Hole  
as mortar for wholeness.

You come to a knowledge-  
less-ness that comes to you

as breath, then to cobblestones  
that haggle with your lungs.

And now this fog, this way  
alleys break into slants

of valley, the bird's-nest view  
of viaducts and terra-cotta

shingles sloping to the sea.  
You resist any thought

you share an architecture  
with clouds. Beyond

stone benches, rooftops grow  
into deserts. You prick a finger

on anything to leave a drop  
of you on its bloom. In a sky

of agave terraces, you begin  
by thanking the ground.

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HALDOL

Once I learned there was no messiah living in my wrists,  
every movement I made ended with broken chains.

I took to the oak groves on my hands and knees,  
swilling the dust of the acorn shells  
my palms had crushed.

Even the hills and their tombs grew sick  
with the splinters of what I smashed against  
my forearms, my fits of broken stones.

I exiled myself to the lake  
a man would later mistake for a desert  
and wander across  
with storms beneath his heels.

They told me after how my skull was a fountain  
where languages I never knew went to bathe.

They told me burning wings  
beat my throat free of its own voice.

The man found me howling on the shore  
and thirsted so much for strangers' love

he sucked the names of hell  
right out of my mouth.

I woke in a house my eyes at first mistook for a cloud.

The man dripped from a needle so thick  
it took four men to thread it into my thigh.

I learned to live in this world  
by living in the bodies of pigs.

Then by living beneath the waves that swallowed them.

## BEDLAM JOURNAL

Morning. The nurse who calls for a horse syringe and restraints. The nurse who starts ten-second countdowns and never makes it to eight. Then, night. Sometimes morning

\*

is night, a flurry of bright orange and plastic mattress. An abridged list of what I am sick of: these windows, talking about these windows, diamond-sized sunrises filling

\*

their steel screens, these floodlights, and their likeness to fire. Overnight, a flame arrived in the shape of a face on a pillow. He replaces the sound of my pulse as my roommate.

\*

Anything I'd expect from a flame with skin takes place. We shake hands. We brush our teeth and masturbate on our mattresses. He slides into and from the same pair of jeans.

\*

On his right forearm, stars and bars. On his left, a Reich flag. His head's shaved. Razor-wide lacerations laddering calf to thigh. I tell him I, too, am a staircase on which I'm lost.

\*

He says he's called Matt. We exchange diagnoses and dosages in place of last names. He says bipolar, ODD, something else with enough psycho in it to make him

\*

win when he says it. I say, *oh brother*. He says, *each day's a different plastic lid in a 7-day pill box*. I say, *what I fill my mouth with to make it through a day won't fit*

\*

*within a day*. If a flag his skin does it, too, need to be forgiven? I almost ask this aloud as Matt and I stand at the dispensary to receive our tablets. Then I ask it.

\*

All the sessions it took to get me to this place have me seeing everything as edges.  
Like—through this window—this sky. How it slips between clouds like a knife.

\*

No. Through a break in the clouds, sky. Be fine with that. Just sky. In the gym today:  
the day. Nothing I'd need to slip beneath insoles or lift my tongue to reveal

\*

I'm not hiding. I guess what I'm talking about is how Matt and I play Lightning  
without shoelaces. We take off our shirts and are skins together. Shirts win. At group

\*

we sit in plastic chairs and all agree on who we'd kill for a bottle of Faygo Red Pop.  
In a chair, the kid who looks my younger brother's age shakes a bit. He tries to explain

what he did to his brother in their room the night before he arrived here. The nurse terminates  
group. He plays a video about shapes different drugs make in the brain. Coke,

\*

the speaker says, is the shape of a man's face held to the pavement by another man's boot.  
Whatever they made me take this morning is the shape of rain breaking the surface

\*

of the river whose bed I tried to swim into. What I mean is I'll grow up to speak of this and this  
alone: it's easier to pass through the 7-gauge hole in my thigh



\*

than to leave this place on time or for the last time. Or sleep. Night is a palm pressed into my shoulder blade. Sometimes, the freeway. Tail lights staring back like eyes. Mouthless

\*

smiles going at least fifteen over the speed limit. Sometimes, a phone call, the speed of goodbye. Snow unrolling across the meadow like gauze. Sometimes, morning. Silence

\*

is a kind of fire. Which means tonight, Matt and I keep one another warm. Rooms named for their quiet are loudest, so tonight I'm cold. An unabridged list of what wakes me

\*

when my blanket is a chemical named as if an angel should wear it: as I was trying to say, even fire shivers tonight. Today's revelations: I'm Level Three now. I get my confiscated

\*

pages back. Matt and I decide we decide we don't need new bloodlines to be brothers. It's noon in a room without days. What else are we going to do? At dinner,

\*

He tells me how a back becomes a flag. Fried chicken and curly fries. I can be fine with this. After lights-out, we sneak past the nurse's station and dispensary. I show him

\*

the linen closet in which a girl and I once made a nation of our bodies. We'd called it the Sovereign Republic of Us. I explain the chief imports: Pall Malls, our tongues.

\*

I show him the Quiet Room. The walls on which I drafted anthems with a pen they didn't let me have. Tomorrow, he'll leave. We write our phone numbers on tissue paper,

\*

and talk some more about what skin means. I'm going to tell him my last name.

## TIME CAPSULE: SUMMER, 2001

It's night in a subdivision whose name fills your ears with forest, and you're sitting in a gazebo whose ivied trellises you've never seen in this shade of streetlight, and you're busy being midwife to your bipolar, which rips through your helixes and enters the world in the shape of you. Sitting with you is a friend named after a city you'd rather live in. You sit until midnight becomes your skin—until she's holding you to the bench by your shoulders, until the moment your skin quits holding you in. In fact, the fact of *you* is a tent stake rusting in Eden, and it quits, too. After this memory dresses only in hyperbole. She says a breakup isn't enough to break anything that wasn't made for brokenness, which, whatever it means, makes sense, because the clouds break, and her lips taste unmistakably like soil from the places they describe. Tomorrow's the art fair. The only way to blend in with this life is to wear plain white t-shirts and buy a different stain from every tent. She suggests a makeover to match the new insides: a fedora made of green felt, a feather, a leather pouch she fills with rose quartz, tiger eye, and malachite (she knows the effect of each stone on the shape she'll take), a belt to tie it around. She picks out an earring made of faux gold. A troll with silver hair and plastic diamonds in its navel dangles from it. She says all you own should be able to hang from your earlobe.

## TAKEOFF SONG

The guy in 5B grabs 4A and C,  
turns to whomever hasn't made a pass  
at sleep, and describes the interior  
of his pickup: gum, dimes and nickels, cold

fries, his lucky breathalyzer, skittles,  
and orange rinds—such little bits of grime  
and rainbow and shine. At least three to-go  
cups filled with piss, spit, and the detritus

of drives without pit stops. An angel sounds  
this way, like a road-tripper made world-sick  
by flight. *God damn*, he says, *if life isn't*  
*the color of Pabst cans, some gutted blunts,*

*and a kidney's stains.* He pauses, then says  
*G- d-.* I know he's right, but don't agree.

## KINDER-CARE

The daycare people asked us to write sentences then handed us multi-colored construction paper, magic markers glitter glue, and scissors. I wanted to write “I like RoboCop,” but couldn’t spell “RoboCop.” On TV once, I saw RoboCop come out of a box a kid drew in the air with his finger. The kid played a GameBoy. I didn’t have a GameBoy but I had fingers so I drew a box on the wall because I couldn’t spell “RoboCop comes out of a box.” In the box, I drew a hand, then a gun in it. Jon, that one kid, got in trouble once at the airport because of a gun. It only shot caps, but the airport people made him throw it in the trashcan, and now he can never be RoboCop. I erased the gun in RoboCop’s hand and drew a squirt gun. The other hand had nothing in it because RoboCop needed a free hand to wave at the kids with. I drew myself in RoboCop’s hand because I wondered what it’d be like to have more friends that weren’t made of metal. Robo-Cop wasn’t all metal. He had hands and half a face—the lips and chin half. Once, we had to watch a movie about candles and brooms that sing a lot, but RoboCop flashed on TV for a second and he looked hurt. A blue eye flicked in the crack across his metal face. So I drew it. At snack, a daycare person waved her finger at the wall and said “who drew the man with flower hands petting an inchworm?” I didn’t know what anyone was talking about. I looked back down at the floor. I drew a box and began to fill it.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY WITH PIRATES

Not with Kalashnikov's and dinghies fitted with oversized outboard motors,  
but the ones with peg-legs, Disney parrots, and pixel skin—the works.  
You and I made it work. They sat with us at bus stops. Paused us at Costco,  
scanning with un-patched eye our receipts against boxes of bulk foods in our carts.

Then? Our son gets sent to the pirate's office for throwing paper balls in class.  
All ride home, he talks about dehydration at sea and the mercy of bound wrists  
when plank-walking. For his birthday, he's asking for a shark attack.  
They kept at this: delivering pizzas and babies, sitting on Senate subcommittees,

refusing to take our trash if we forgot to double-knot the bags.  
Table silences grew less oppressive than living in a house full of pirates.  
With a pirate guide, I thought, perhaps we could sail through that silence.  
His name's Jonah. He cobbles together a believable vernacular from kitten videos

and the comments sections of clickbait. He has a history of living in hungry,  
broken things. He lies supine on the California king in his tunic and tights  
and tells us again about the time a failed mutiny left him marooned  
on the floating corpse of some island-fish. The story goes: in the Atlantic

with only a saber, he cut a him-sized hole in the dorsal surface through which  
he slipped into the creature and survived for months by eating from its insides.  
He cut portholes along the starboard and port sides, four holes in the belly  
the diameter of his limbs, and turned the beast into a ship he captained

with his own body. And some nights, he withdraws into his body to remember  
the ocean and the ship. And some nights there's no argh in him. You turn off  
the flatscreen. *What's wrong, dear?* you ask. I say *nothing*, and he says *everything*  
at the same moment. You stroke his beard and your eyes go all maritime.

*You were quiet at dinner*, you say. The kids, he tells us, wanted zombies,  
were expecting zombies, or werewolves, or at least a bedazzled vampire.  
I too stroke his beard. Sometimes my life seems apocryphal to me—  
I'll Wiki it tomorrow. My smart phone is on the end table. It's too far to reach.

## VEGAS EPITHALAMIUM

I've come to meet you. To mate with you.  
To challenge you, your friends,  
and every water glass in this city  
to a sweating contest at a night club  
with too many fog machines. And to win.  
I come to in a vacant lot edging the desert,  
and to the conclusion I may be  
a disembodied liver walking toward a grove  
of screwbean mesquite. It's true—  
sometimes people I'd rather be  
untether from my spine at sunrise  
and drag their baggage to hotels on the strip.  
And that's okay. I come to kiss  
what I've yet to see. To bind you, me,  
and the cosmos at the ring-finger  
with jute-twine in a drive-thru chapel.  
I used to feel like the third wheel  
on some defunct casino's date with dynamite.  
I'd lumber through corridors drunk-winking  
at smoky wainscoting and repeating  
the word *faux* until it felt real.  
Stone buttresses and foam-board  
canals always opened into the clink  
of the same coin-fed daylight.  
So? Levers reset, and there's love again—  
as much in the flesh as in the roulette,  
the buffets, gold packages, and how  
you slip into a gown made of movement  
and become silver light on a dance floor.  
Let's fall asleep in the hallway of a river  
and wake in the honeymoon suite  
of a sword. As the roller coaster shoots  
toward the sky's ledge,  
I'll fall back into my skin if you do.

EDEN

—*For H*

Each morning, your hair  
    like a dead mouse  
covers the drain.  
    Each morning,  
water splashes  
    away its onyx-  
colored strands.  
    My fingers live  
for this. I peel it  
    from river rock  
with wet tissue  
    and at night, the garden  
it crawls from falls  
    across pillows.  
I breathe sandal-  
    wood. I breathe  
smoke. My nose  
    was made for this.



## ON HEARING A PASSENGER SING TO HIMSELF

Half-stalled on tracks  
beyond salt hills and scrap-  
heaps, I watch his A-Major  
scale a Jacob's Ladder  
hanging from the thunder-heads.  
His G-Minor lifts the synaptic tatters  
of a plastic bag from rain-  
tamped brambles. Dear sir.  
Dear man dressed like rusted rail plate  
and the threat of derailment,  
I know sometimes we make  
about as much sense  
as this scattering of clouds  
that appears to me as knee-kissed  
stones in Gethsemane,  
unshaped though it is now  
by lightning. I hear asylum  
in your stutter. I hear its shutters—  
the buckled floorboards and storm-  
swollen rafters of its day room.  
Footsteps of vandals who,  
imagining you as ghost, go nights  
to hear your echoes in an isolation  
chamber, or to outline you  
against the air with spray paint.  
I hear your teeth and whatever angels  
stretch there like patients  
on sweat-yellowed mattresses.  
I hear storms break. Dear sir  
whose sounds encamp in sideways stares.  
Dear you who lights fires  
inside the silence. Is this the song  
for how tires and rusted carts meet  
in reeds? For where, just past  
our city, the smokestacks  
weave the tree line wreaths?

## SHORE SONG

The flood tide took its time filling in our footprints. We sprinted up the beach.  
By a tuft of sea oats, I wrote my answer with a stick. As much for you as for the beach.

We spent Christmas in the Keys, and your mother called me godless. On a postcard,  
I wrote: anything I love is god enough for me. On a shoal, we gathered seaweed for our wreath.

Night. Moonless, and yet: gull feathers, clam shells, white sand, calm. Past the jetties,  
a world happens. Past the clouds, perhaps another. Cloudlessly, day. Nettles on the beach.

Only once, I was this cold. At summer camp. We all huddled on the riverbank as lightning  
cracked in the branches. I prayed. Our canoes filled with river. Lampreys swam underneath.

Your creed: step into waves as deeply as your shivers let you. Put a gash in something  
you need. Swim to atolls and leave some skin from your knees. Hate the sin, but not the beach.

Lily pads once lured you waist-deep into a pond. At home, your father greeted you with salt  
and fire. You loved the little leeches of the world. He loved Jesus, filet knives, a leather sheath.

That summer, love's sum: sunrises, candles, our bodies after and between. Wash, rinse, repeat.  
At night, we shook sand from our sheets—what I meant to tell you, you said to tell the beach.

Some days, you were my church, and I was your idolatry. Others, we couldn't believe—  
even with a snorkel—in a coral reef. Always in sharks, though. There were always teeth.

You taught me how to sidestroke out of riptides. I preferred to ride them. You were rescue  
enough for me—even when you penned psalms in my hands, when they washed off at the beach.

That far offshore, I believed. We swam until our toes felt sand. You kissed me until I gasped.  
Whatever wasn't your body was a plague: the mansions, the gates, the dunes beneath.

If nothing else, Sea us, remember how, by firelight, you stayed up later than the sea.  
Remember the bed of palm leaves—the driftwood, the kindling you gathered on the beach.

## COR-TEN STEEL

I am fashioned as trusses, and thus stitch  
cliffs face to face. Add river to that list

of places you'll live to walk over. Rust  
as a kind of maintenance. Rain, a seal.

Like yours, the first version of my body  
couldn't stand—my maker had to make me

as Gusset plates that weathered at the rate  
of weld-points. Then a keystone held my arch

in place. If you passed over the gorge twice  
each day and lived for sixty years this way,

I'd save you three. Remember my tie-backs,  
how they pierced the mine shafts and anchored me

to the wood and dust beneath the kudzu?  
Remember? Like yours, my first task was earth.

## INVERSE ICARUS

Steel wings lift from the unlit taxiway.  
Tonight I'll sleep in them.

I'll split my hours between eyelids, black coffee,  
and clouds you might call

a kind of rapture. Beneath me, skyscrapers  
flatten into an amber wildfire

mounting hillsides whose heat my face keeps  
arcing toward. I can imagine

worse than being the architect of my own descent.  
Father, if I must be an arrow

fired into darkness with my hair in flames,  
then I, too, will be an archer—

I don't know where I'll land, but I know  
what I'm aiming for.

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